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ABSTRACT

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are subjective experiences at the threshold of death which can include strong positive affect, dissociation from the physical body, and paranormal/transcendental phenomena. Empirical investigation of NDEs has typically relied upon retrospective reports and personality studies of individuals who have come close to death (e.g., through accidents, illness, surgical procedures, etc.) and later recovered. Psychological understanding of NDEs has been complicated by the failure of past research to reveal any personality factors consistently related to reporting NDEs. Recently, Wilson and Barber (1983) have suggested that some excellent hypnotic subjects (fantasy-prone personalities) may be more likely to report NDEs than the rest of the population. This hypothesis was investigated in subjects who had: (1) reported prototypical NDEs (N=63); (2) been close to death, but without reporting NDEs (N=28), and (3) never been near death (N=45). Subjects completed the Near-Death Experience Scale; the Memory, Imagining, and Creativity Schedule (MICS); the Absorption Scale; and the Survey of Psi Experiences. Subjects who had never been near death did not complete the NDE scale. The results revealed that the MICS and Absorption Scale were highly correlated and that both measures were significantly correlated with NDE Scale scores. Analysis of variance revealed that the group reporting NDEs scored significantly higher on the MICS than either comparison group, and NDE reporters' scores on the Absorption and PSI scales were higher than those of the never near death group. These results lend partial support to the hypothesis that fantasy-prone personalities may be more likely to report NDEs than the general population. (NRB)

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Near-Death Experiences and the "Fantasy-Prone" Personality: Preliminary Findings

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ABSTRACT

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are subjective experiences at the threshold of death which can include strong positive affect, dissociation from the physical body, and paranormal/transcendental phenomena. Empirical investigation of NDEs has typically relied upon retrospective reports and personality studies of individuals who have come close to death (e.g., through accidents, illness, surgical procedures, etc.) and later recovered. Psychological understanding of NDEs has been complicated by the failure of past research to reveal any personality factors consistently related to reporting NDEs. Recently, Wilson and Barber (1983) have suggested that some excellent hypnotic subjects ("fantasy-prone personalities") may be more likely to report NDEs than the rest of the population. This hypothesis was investigated in a questionnaire study comparing groups of subjects who have: 1.) reported prototypical NDEs, 2.) been close to death, but without reporting NDEs, and 3.) never been near death. Results lend partial support to Wilson and Barber's hypothesis. Implications for understanding NDEs are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) are subjectively perceived events reported by some individuals who have come close to death. Most investigators agree that the experience, recollection, and recounting of NDEs are valid and often profound psychological events. NDEs commonly include strong positive affect, a conviction that one has died, out-of-body experiences, a panoramic life review, paranormal phenomena, and transcendental experiences. NDEs appear to range along a continuum, with some individuals reporting few or no unusual experiences associated with an event which has brought them close to death, and others reporting vivid, organized experiences which have deeply affected their subsequent behavior and beliefs. This suggests that NDEs may vary as a function of personality factors; however, past investigations employing traditional personality measures have revealed no consistent correlates of NDEs.

On the basis of extensive interviews with a group of excellent hypnotic subjects, Wilson and Barber (1983) have suggested that this population may be more likely than normal control subjects to report NDEs. These subjects were also more likely to report past experiences of other paranormal phenomena such as out-of-body experiences, religious visions, experiences with apparitions, and psychic abilities. Other characteristics of these subjects included a strong investment in one's fantasy life, vivid hallucinatory ability, intense sensory experiences, and excellent, often eidetic, memory. Based on their interview data, Wilson and Barber suggested that these individuals comprise a distinct personality category which they have labeled the "fantasy-prone personality". These

investigators hypothesized that NDEs are hallucinatory phenomena (cf. Siegel, 1980) which fantasy-prone personalities are predisposed to experience vividly and convincingly. This paper presents preliminary data from a study employing self-report questionnaires to investigate the hypothesis that "fantasy-proneness" is related to reports of NDEs.

METHOD

Questionnaires

The Near-Death Experience Scale (Greyson, 1983) is a reliable, valid inventory indicating the extent of an individual's NDE. Subjects receive both a total score and scores on four components or aspects of NDEs. Component scores are: cognitive (time distortion, thought acceleration, life review, sudden understanding), affective (feelings of peace, joy and cosmic unity, experience of a brilliant light), paranormal (enhanced vision or hearing, apparent extrasensory perception, precognitive vision, out-of-body experience), and transcendental (encounters with an apparently unearthly realm, a mystical being, visible spirits, a barrier or point of no return that if crossed precludes a return to life).

The Memory, Imagining, and Creativity Schedule (MICS, Short Form; Wilson & Barber, 1983b) is a 52 item checklist of characteristics associated with fantasy-proneness, including vivid fantasy, sensory experience and memory, and belief and interest in altered states of consciousness and paranormal phenomena. This checklist was derived from a structured individual interview used by Wilson and Barber (1983a) in their research on fantasy-proneness. This measure discriminates between fantasy-prone and normal control subjects at a highly significant level (T.X. Barber, personal communication, December, 1984), and is significantly correlated with hypnotic susceptibility (Myers, 1983).

The Absorption Scale (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) is a measure of the predisposition to become highly involved in sensory and imaginative experiences, and is also related to hypnotic susceptibility.

The Survey of Psi Experiences (Palmer, 1979) is a checklist assessing experiences with a variety of parapsychological phenomena.

Procedure

Members of the International Association for Near-Death Studies were solicited to participate in an extensive questionnaire study from which the present data were drawn. Three groups were studied:

1. Persons claiming to have had NDEs (n=63).
2. Subjects who reported an event which brought them near death, but who did not feel they had an NDE (n=28).
3. Subjects who had never been near death (n=45).

All subjects investigated in the present study had completed the MICS; however, subjects in the Never near death group did not receive the NDE scale and there were substantial missing data for the Absorption and Psi scales in all groups.

RESULTS

Preliminary summary data are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 indicates means, standard deviations, and cell sizes for each sample on the four measures. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare sample means on the questionnaires, and significant differences are indicated in Table 1. In Table 2, correlations are presented for combined groups, with the Never near death group not included in correlations involving the NDE Scale. It should be noted that the Near-death event subjects typically endorsed several items on the NDE Scale, even though they did not feel that they had experienced an NDE.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations

Group	NDE Scale	MICS	Absorption	Psi
NDE report	17.05 (6.32) (n=63)	25.60 (9.16) (n=63)	25.53 (7.16) (n=43)	10.38 (4.53) (n=39)
Near-death event	2.18 (2.23) (n=28)	21.25 (8.23) (n=28)	21.89 (7.02) (n=19)	8.71 (3.31) (n=14)
Never near death	--	20.22 (7.81) (n=45)	20.92 (8.43) (n=25)	6.79 (3.97) (n=19)

Standard deviations and numbers of subjects completing each measure are given in parentheses below means.

ANOVA results: Significant differences between group means were found for the MICS, $F(2,135)=5.88$, $p<.01$, the Absorption Scale, $F(2,86)=3.48$, $p<.05$, and the Survey of Psi Experiences, $F(2,71)=4.81$, $p<.05$. Means for the NDE report group were significantly higher on the MICS than for both the Near-death event and Never near death groups ($p<.05$). For the Absorption and Psi scales, means for the NDE report group were significantly higher than those for the Never near death group, and the Near-death event group did not differ from the two other groups.

TABLE 2

Correlations for Combined Groups

	MICS	Absorption	Psi
NDE Scale:			
Total	.26*	.28*	.19
Cognitive	.28**	.31*	.22
Affective	.22*	.20	.11
Paranormal	.34***	.45***	.31*
Transcendental	.06	.05	.02
	(n=91)	(n=62)	(n=53)
MICS		.73***	.63***
	--	(n=87)	(n=72)
Absorption		--	.57***
			(n=68)

* = p<.05 ** = p<.01 *** = p<.001

DISCUSSION

Preliminary results support an association between fantasy-proneness and subjects' reports of NDEs. The MICS and Absorption Scale were highly correlated, suggesting that they tap the same personality dimension. Both measures were significantly correlated with total scores on the NDE Scale, as well as with cognitive and paranormal component scores. In addition, the MICS was significantly related to scores on the NDE affective component, and Absorption bore a marginally significant correlation. Analysis of variance revealed that the group reporting NDEs scored significantly higher on the MICS than either comparison group, and scores on the Absorption and Psi scales were higher than those of the Never near death comparison group. However, it should be noted that mean scores on the MICS for the NDE report group were substantially lower than those for Wilson and Barber's fantasy-prone subjects (T.X. Barber, personal communication), although there were almost certainly more individuals that could be labeled "fantasy-prone" in this group than in the comparison groups.

These results indicate that persons who report NDEs may have a greater investment in fantasy and imaginative processes, more vivid imagery and memory, greater receptivity to altered states of consciousness and unusual subjective experiences, and greater belief in paranormal phenomena, when compared to normal controls. It is likely that some combination of these characteristics would make this group more likely to remember, report, and elaborate subjective experiences which take place at the point of death. It is interesting to note that no scales seemed related to the

transcendental component of the NDE scale, which might be expected to relate more to pre-existing religious beliefs than to cognitive abilities such as imagination, imagery and memory.

Further research will attempt to determine whether the personality factors investigated in this study are precursors or sequelae of NDEs, and whether fantasy-prone personalities comprise a subcategory of individuals reporting NDEs.

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